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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON AZERBAIJANI FRUSTRATION WITH CO-CHAIR COUNTRIES' UNGA VOTE

REF: BAKU 00306

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Public attention on the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries' vote against Azerbaijan's "Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan" UNGA resolution continues, as do GOAJ official statements and some orchestrated political activities. While the issue has gradually slipped off the media frontburner (including the earlier front-page coverage in all major papers), President Aliyev's March 2 meeting with the Co-Chairs in Bucharest raised the issue again. Local press coverage has been less inflammatory than the days immediately following the March 14 UNGA vote. Trusted Embassy contacts reported that while the general public's interest in the immediate issue of the UNGA resolution is fading a bit, the Co-Chairs will have to deal with the GOAJ and the general public's belief that the UNGA resolution should serve as a basis for future Minsk Group negotiations. One independent analyst also suggested that the GOAJ seeks to channel public frustration over Nagorno-Karabakh toward the Minsk Group, rather than the GOAJ, particularly during an election year. Given the public's general perception that the U.S. was the one truly honest broker in the Minsk Group, we are facing a greater hit in the media, with public ire and disappointment focused largely on the U.S. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Based on the continuing stream of official GOAJ statements, some elements in the GOAJ appear interested in keeping some level of public attention on the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries' vote against Azerbaijan's "Situation in the Occupied Territories of Azerbaijan" UNGA resolution, although these statements are much more measured than in the days immediately following the March 14 vote. Deputy Foreign Minister Araz Azimov gave an April interview, carried by ANS television and local papers, including Ekspress. (The majority of Azerbaijanis get their information from television, vice traditional print media.) In the Ekspress article, Azimov was quoted as saying that "the Karabakh talks are in a hopeless condition," while reiterating his routine criticism of the Co-Chairs for trying to "monopolize" the process. Azimov also stated that the Minsk Group Process should be based on the UNGA resolution. In an April 2 statement after President Aliyev met with the Co-Chairs, Presidential Foreign Affairs Advisor Novruz Mammadov said publicly the meeting was "very tense" and President Aliyev voiced his "strong protest" against the

Co-Chair countries' voting position.

¶ 13. (C) Two other incidents suggest elements in the GOAJ want to maintain some public attention on the UNGA vote, while not inflaming the issue. On April 1, the Parliament discussed the UNGA resolution, with the overwhelming majority of MPs sounding the themes of the resolution as a "victory" for Azerbaijan and criticizing the Co-Chair countries' voting position. Interestingly, MP Fazil Gazanfaroglu from the government-leaning Great Creation Party criticized the MFA's poor handling of the vote by not securing more "yes" votes. On March 19, the pro-government New Azerbaijan Party (YAP) hosted a roundtable on the UNGA resolution, which resulted in a statement of protest against the Co-Chair countries, questioning their objectivity in the peace process, but not calling for Minsk Group dissolution. The statement was signed by a variety of government parties and a government-linked NGO umbrella organization. YAP did not invite members of the opposition or civil society to this forum.

¶ 14. (C) Tabib Huseynov, the director of the International Crisis Group in Azerbaijan and an IDP, told us while the general public's immediate interest in the UNGA issue is gradually fading, the lasting public impression is that the UNGA resolution should serve as a basis for future Minsk Group negotiations. Huseynov said increased criticism of the U.S. voting position stems from the fact that, fairly or unfairly, the GOAJ and the general public have higher expectations for the U.S. than Russia or France. Huseynov also highlighted the general public's fundamental misperception about the role of the Minsk Group, noting that most Azerbaijanis view the Minsk Group as a mechanism for imposing, rather than facilitating, a settlement. Local

political commentator Ilgar Mammadov agreed with Huseynov that immediate public outrage is gradually fading, but noted that the UNGA vote will be a marker that will remain in the government and public's consciousness. Mammadov also argued that the GOAJ seeks to channel public frustration over Nagorno-Karabakh and the occupied territories toward the Minsk Group, rather than the GOAJ, particularly during an election year.

¶ 15. (C) In addition to the public drumbeat, the GOAJ also is keeping up steady private pressure on countries that abstained on the UNGA vote. Several ambassadors told Ambassador Derse that they have been pressed repeatedly, formally and informally, by senior GOAJ officials to explain why their governments voted "against" Azerbaijan; one frustrated Ambassador said that the Azerbaijanis simply would not accept that an abstention was nothing more than a decision not to vote on the issue, noting the GOAJ's "if you're not with us your against us" view. The OSCE Head of Office noted that he too is facing pressure from the GOAJ. In an April 2 meeting, President Aliyev reportedly told the OSCE Ambassador that although he recognizes that the bilateral Baku mission (separate from the OSCE Chairman-in-Office's Special Representative for NK) had nothing to do with the UNGA resolution, the Co-Chairs, vote could not help but cast all OSCE operations in Azerbaijan in a negative light.

¶ 16. (C) Comment: Although the immediate storm of negative public reaction is passing, we remain concerned that disillusionment with the U.S. vote against Azerbaijan's UNGA resolution has hardened attitudes here and could have some lasting impact on our broader bilateral relations, particularly on democracy promotion during an election year. President Aliyev's comment to the Ambassador on March 1 that he was "very disturbed" by the U.S. vote suggests the U.S. now faces both bruised egos (reftel) and a hardened perception among senior GOAJ officials that the U.S. does not truly "value" Azerbaijan as a partner, as illustrated by our lack of "support" on Azerbaijan's top policy issue. While misplaced, the perception is real and will shape the way the key GOAJ policymakers approach the Minsk Group process and some issues in the relationship. Apart from generating

genuine feelings of disappointment, the vote also serves as a convenient excuse for those in the GOAJ who are intrinsically not disposed to support the U.S. on Azerbaijan's western aspirations.

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